



Environmental Justice: Context-Sensitive Planning and Community-Based Transportation Planning Grants FY 2007/08

TIPS AND POINTERS

The California Department of Transportation is pleased to announce the start of the FY 2007/08 Transportation Planning Grant cycle. **Complete applications must be submitted by October 13, 2006.**

This information has been compiled to help prospective grant applicants prepare their proposals for a transportation planning grant. The intent of sharing this information is to improve the overall quality of applications for the Environmental Justice (EJ) and Community-Based Transportation Planning (CBTP) grant programs.

It is important to remember that no one can guarantee a specific application will be successful in winning a grant. Each grant cycle is competitive, and it is impossible to predict where a grant application might rank in the final evaluation.

The following tips point out some of the more common mistakes and weaknesses we have seen in reviewing past grant applications:

1. Clear statement of need and purpose. Rather than just make a sweeping statement about past problems and inequities, it is helpful to be more concise about defining the transportation barriers and problems that confront your community and how you plan to address them. Applicants can define their needs and purposes, such as better access to jobs and health care, safer access to schools and playgrounds, speeding traffic and air pollution, impact of heavy trucking on local streets, inadequate transit services, promoting more in-fill development, or reducing congestion.

Past applications that were NOT competitive dedicated lots of writing to “injustices” or “impacts” and failed to define the transportation and planning issues and how they would be addressed through community involvement in the planning. While one can be passionate about advocating for a community, the documents of planning need to be objective and readable.

2. Clearly defining the community, its boundaries, ethnic make-up, languages spoken, income levels, and transportation issues helps identify a community's conditions and needs. For example, Environmental Justice is aimed at helping low-income, minority, and Tribal communities, so it is important to research this information and state it clearly.

Past applications that were NOT competitive sometimes stated that some Hispanic and Asian “dialects” were spoken in the community and then proceeded to develop plans for revitalizing their downtown businesses to boost tourism and shopping. An applicant's ability to identify the demographics and even the language barriers of a community helps strengthen the perception you are really able to promote Environmental Justice and community involvement in transportation planning.

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3. Digital photos and maps of the community. Digital photography is becoming more common and affordable. Photos help support an application because they help convey a complete picture of a diverse community, the condition of its streets and housing, and its transportation problems. A clear map that helps locate a community within a city or county is also helpful.

Past applications that had digital photos and maps generally stood out for the grant evaluation teams. Applicants need to know that applications from one region of the state might be examined and evaluated by persons who are outside of the region, so any visual information that helps support and enhance the application is to the applicant's advantage. Please note: If a grant is awarded, we will encourage you to take digital photos of community meetings, focus groups, field trips to critical sites, and conceptual renderings to help document the work.

4. Practical purposes and outcomes are always encouraged. A good application should always try to achieve the achievable. Setting realistic goals and outcomes that a community can understand, accept, and take ownership for in order to address real issues of mobility, access, equity, safety, and economic opportunity are going to be more impressive than a study that does not have an obvious, practical outcome. It would be ideal if a grant project's planning and findings eventually lead to the adoption and programming of future funding through your Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for transportation improvements.
5. Making sure the real needs are addressed is encouraged. If one of the issues affecting a community's ability to participate in planning is that community members speak primary languages other than English, then the public participation portion of the planning process must logically include a more proactive, bilingual outreach. California is becoming a larger and more diverse state, and there are demographic changes that are driving the way we conduct planning and community outreach. Competitive applications will reflect that awareness and sensitivity.
6. Adhering to your original plan and partnerships is strongly encouraged. While circumstances can sometimes change, the Department awards these grants based on a specific purpose, scope of work, and partnership with a community. This means conducting planning with communities in a thoughtful and sincere manner. We discourage the submission of grant applications with the attractive goal of helping a community's mobility, livability, and safety if there is any doubt you are able to undertake the necessary partnerships to do the planning.

After a grant is awarded, applicants sometimes lose sight of their original plans and partnerships and attempt to add major changes to the work that were not previously approved or agreed upon. These actions can adversely affect your credibility and your relationship with relevant communities—and end up delaying the project.

7. Setting a realistic budget and timeline is encouraged. Applicants are sometimes tempted to request the maximum amount of \$250,000* without regard to the scope of work or reasonableness of costs. Funds under the grant programs are limited, so the evaluation team will be looking very closely at any large requests for funding. A \$250,000* grant will be awarded only for the most exceptional proposal. A more realistic grant request (\$50,000--\$150,000) generally indicates more thought went into the planning, and if awarded would allow the grant programs to utilize their limited resources to help more communities.

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Timelines also need to be realistic and allow sufficient time for hiring consultants, organizing and convening community meetings and focus groups, hiring interpreters (if needed), conducting surveys and analysis of the findings, and preparing final reports and recommendations. Past grant recipients who did not look ahead ended up seeking time-extensions, which can be done, but also add delays.

8. Understanding and following the planning terms is important. Many terms, such as livable communities, sustainable communities, equity in planning, context-sensitive solutions, in-fill development, transit-oriented development, and neighborhood revitalization are in vogue with planners.

Many grant applications in the past have used these terms liberally, with less regard for their original meaning and purpose. Applicants are sometimes tempted to fill their application with such phrases but fail to define them or integrate them into the scope of work. Taking the time to understand these terms and reaching agreement with potential partners on how they relate to the actual planning and outcomes will generally result in a better application and an easier roadmap to follow if a grant is awarded.

9. Public participation and community involvement are essential to successful planning. Community awareness, acceptance, and involvement in the planning process are vital ingredients that cannot be overstressed. When communities feel a sense of ownership to the planning because their needs, issues, and concerns are being expressed and considered, there is greater momentum to the entire planning process that helps the work reach a beneficial end. Applicants can be tempted to short-change this part of the planning after a grant is awarded in order to pursue other priorities--this is not desirable. Environmental Justice and Community-Based transportation planning grants are intended to help diverse communities become partners in planning and their participation as full partners is not an option.
10. Connecting the dots and proofreading the application are encouraged. You are submitting a proposal for a planning grant, and it is important to connect the dots and tie each step of the planning process together to reach a logical and beneficial end. Having others critically proofread the application for clarity and flow will be helpful. If the application is hard to read with omissions and errors, it will generally convey a lack of good planning and purpose. The best written applications were a complete package without being unnecessarily wordy, because they presented a clear need and purpose, a clear picture of community demographics and profiles, specified the issues and barriers, laid out the steps of community involvement and information gathering, and brought community members and diverse agencies together in a common effort to identify potential solutions.

* The maximum grant award for a CBTP grant for FY 07/08 is \$300,000.